ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH *Fact Sheet*

Public Health Assessment

What is a Public Health Assessment?

A Public Health Assessment (PHA) gathers information about hazardous substances at a site and evaluates whether exposure to those substances might cause harm to people. The PHA considers how chemicals at a site may affect public health in the past, now, or in the future. An assessment is needed to help decide how to protect people's health. It looks at five sources of information.

- **Environmental data**, such as levels of chemicals in soil, water, air and food.
- **Exposure data,** how people come into contact with chemicals at the site.
- **Toxicity data,** the toxic effects of chemicals found at the site.
- **Health outcome data**, including information on community-wide rates of illness, disease, and death compared with national and state rates.
- **Community health concerns**, such as citizen reports about how the site affects their health or quality of life.

After considering all health data at a site, a PHA will determine if exposure to chemicals could have an effect on human health. An assessment tries to answer these questions.

- What chemicals have been released to the environment?
- What are the levels of chemicals found in the environment at or near the site?
- How might people come into contact with the chemicals (exposure pathways)?
- How might those chemicals affect people's health?
- Does living or working near the site mean people may get sick?
- What actions need to be taken to protect public health?

Who Conducts Health Assessments?

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (a federal public health agency) and the Washington State Department of Health have entered into a cooperative agreement to form a team of specialists that conduct Public Health Assessments in Washington State. This team works through the Department of Health in order to study possible public health problems caused by chemicals at hazardous waste sites.

What other activities are generated from a Public Health Assessment?

Depending on the conclusions of the PHA at the site, other activities may be performed.

- **Community Involvement:** Involvement of the community is an important component of the PHA process and is accomplished through public meetings, community assistance panels and availability sessions.
- **Education:** Educating the public and/or health care providers about chemical exposure provides a basis for communicating the results and findings of PHAs. Education can include public meetings, special sessions at hospitals, fact sheets, booklets, etc.
- **Health Studies:** Health studies look to see if chemicals in the environment are linked to adverse health effects in people. Methods used to conduct health studies include examination of past health records, medical testing and surveys.
- **Research:** Sometimes we do not know enough about the health effects of a toxic chemical. A PHA may recommend that additional studies or chemical specific research be conducted.

How can I be involved in a Public Health Assessment?

We want to hear from people who live near or work at the site. Input from the local community helps identify:

- How the site may have affected people's health.
- What health effects people around the site worry about.
- What the public thinks about the clean up process.

What happens when a Public Health Assessment is finished?

The PHA determines if actions are needed to reduce or eliminate human exposure to hazardous substances in the environment. Examples of PHA recommendations include:

- If the water is polluted at a site, we may recommend that people get their drinking water from another source.
- If chemicals are found in soil at a site, we may recommend that contact with soil be limited. Steps taken by regulatory agencies include fencing off the site, digging up contaminated soil and covering the ground with plants, plastic, or pavement.
- If food is contaminated at a site, people may be advised to limit or stop eating it. One example is a fish advisory that might provide limits on how much fish you should eat and suggests cooking tips so that the chemicals are left out of your meal.

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